

OP-EDS

# WHAT EHRENREICH DIDN'T KNOW

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*Unlike the zombies coming to get Barbra in *Night of the Living Dead*, market forces provide her with essentials like footwear. Public domain.*

*Had I Known* was the title of Barbara Ehrenreich's final book before her passing on September 1, and indeed, the longtime investigative journalist never closed the book on what there was to learn.

In the introduction, Ehrenreich wrote that "I realized that there was something wrong with an arrangement whereby a relatively affluent person, such as I had become, could afford to write about minimum-wage jobs" — the subject that brought her fame and fortune as an author.

Ehrenreich's reporting on the conditions of low-paying work in the bestselling exposé *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* was **summed up** by Roderick T. Long as a rebuke "to those on the right who heroise the managerial class and imagine that the main causes of poverty are laziness and welfare." As Charles W. Johnson **noted** at the time, *Nickel and Dimed* manages to also be "a frighteningly real response to those feel-good liberals who proclaim the virtues of voluntarily living in poverty and complain about how frustrated they feel with their Palm Pilots and SUVs."

A decade later, Ehrenreich **wrote** in the afterword to a new edition of *Nickel and Dimed* that having assumed that "the standard liberal wish list" of more "public programs" was the way to "reduce poverty" had obscured how the same government increases poverty by criminalizing efforts of the poor to get by.

*Had I Known* includes a lauding of "informal networks" which "put the official welfare state, with its relentless suspicions and grudging outlays, to shame." Yet it also ascribes economic inequality to "the free-enterprise system" which "depends only on *markets*." Ehrenreich suggests this is really a "free-president system" in which elected officials are "free of all responsibility for the economically anguished." Yet her own muckraking shows an economy actually existing far closer to Paul Goodman's term "un-free enterprise."

In *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America*, Ehrenreich viewed a Templeton Foundation report's rhetoric about how "free enterprise and other principles of capitalism can, and do, benefit the poor" as indicating "a foregone conclusion." While not "a right-wing conspiracy," free-enterprise advocacy by groups like Templeton and the Association of Private Enterprise Education was inherently "conservative."

Ehrenreich should not have been so sure if she had attended a panel at APEE's conference the following year making the case for "free market anti-capitalism," including contributions from both **Johnson** and **Long**. Unhindered by obstacles such as what Johnson **calls** "the government-supported stranglehold of big banks on capital" withholding funding for business outside of big business, market forces would not conserve entrenched power dynamics but dissolve them. Ehrenreich might even have recognized a comrade in Long when he concludes that "libertarianism is the proletarian revolution."

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## PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY

1. "**What Ehrenreich didn't know**" by Joel Schlosberg, *USA Today*, September 9, 2022
2. "**What Ehrenreich didn't know**" by Joel Schlosberg, *The Spectrum*, September 9, 2022
3. "**What Ehrenreich didn't know**" by Joel Schlosberg, *Yahoo! News*, September 9, 2022
4. "**What Ehrenreich didn't know**" by Joel Schlosberg, *The Montana Standard*, September 9, 2022

5. "What Ehrenreich didn't know" by Joel Schlosberg, *The Daily Star* [Hammond, Louisiana], September 12, 2022
6. "What Ehrenreich Didn't Know" by Joel Schlosberg, Williston, North Dakota *Herald*, September 26, 2022